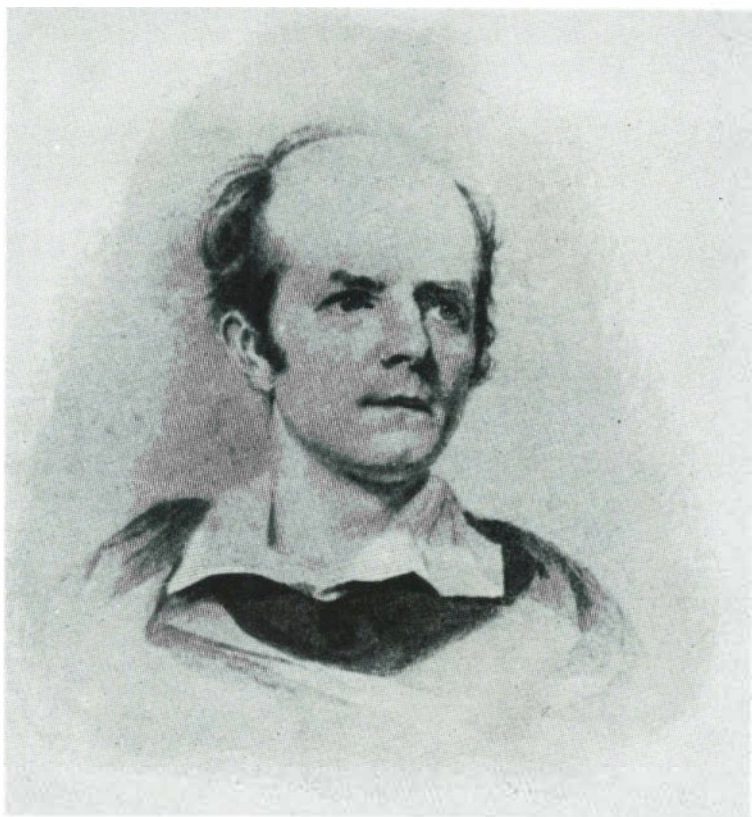


JOSEPH COTTLE OF BRISTOL

BASIL COTTLE



BRISTOL BRANCH OF THE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

LOCAL HISTORY PAMPHLETS

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Joseph Cottle of Bristol is the sixty-fourth pamphlet to be published by the Bristol Branch of the Historical Association. It is the Fifth Annual Southey Lecture, and it was delivered by Dr Basil Cottle at Christ Church, City, Bristol on 2 June 1983. The Southey Lectures were promoted by the Rector and Church Council of Old Bristol Parish (Christ Church with St. Ewen). They were intended to consider Bristolians who had made a major contribution to the Arts, Literature, Philosophy, Science, Politics and Religion. The series was named after Robert Southey, who was baptized in Christ Church in 1774.

The Branch wishes to acknowledge a very generous gift from an anonymous donor as well as a grant from the Publications Committee of the University of Bristol.

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The cover illustration of Joseph Cottle c. 1810 is from the lost miniature by Nathan Branwhite. The photograph is by Mr. Dennis Cutter.

The Pamphlet Appeal Fund, which is designed to put the series on a sound financial basis, is still open and readers are invited to contribute. All donations, however small, will be of help. They should be sent to Peter Harris, 74 Bell Barn Road, Stoke Bishop, Bristol BS9 2DG. Cheques should be made payable to the Bristol Branch of the Historical Association.

The next pamphlet in the series will be by Peter Harris and will examine the various railway schemes in nineteenth-century Bristol which never in fact came to fruition.

A list of pamphlets still in print is given on the inside back cover. They can be obtained from most Bristol booksellers, from the shop in the City Museum, from the Porter's Lodge in the Wills Memorial Building or direct from Peter Harris.

JOSEPH COTTLE OF BRISTOL

My subject is a man whose one fame has been that he published the *Lyrical Ballads* at Bristol in 1798. By his generosity and farsightedness he enabled three acknowledged poets – the Laureate Wordsworth, Coleridge, and the Laureate Southey – to practise their art while they were still poor young men; but I hope to show that he had a hitherto unpublished life of his own, with literary quarrels, a spectacular lawsuit, geology, a little chemistry, Broadmead Baptist Church and Zion Congregational Church, two lame legs, near-blindness, lung haemorrhages, the composition of more verse than has been composed by almost any other English writer, and all the ups-and-downs of a life of 83 years.

Joseph Cottle was born in Barton Alley, Bristol, on 9 March 1770, just before Chatterton's suicide and Wordsworth's birth. The family was one whose fortunes had grievously declined; it derived, with its name, from the fortified manor of Cotehele (Cornish for 'the wood by the river') on the Tamar in Cornwall, whence it spread through the South-West, leaving its name at Cottles Barton in North Tawton, Devon, at Cottles Oak in Frome, Somerset, at the manor called Cottles in Atworth, Wilts, and at Frampton Cottle (now misspelt Cotterell) in Gloucestershire. In the female line it produced the Earls of Mount Edgcumbe and the French poet François de Malherbe, who originated the Alexandrine verse; but, having once been knightly, it lost its wealth and importance, backed the wrong horses in the Civil War, suffered at least *one* luckless spendthrift, and was by the 18th century reduced to trade, tenant farming, labour, and even, in time, university lecturing. Its eclipse can best be illustrated in the Revd. John Skinner's *Journal of a Somerset Rector 1803–1834*, published by the Oxford University Press in 1984; here members of the family are among the worst sluts and rogues of the parish of Camerton, where by 1120 their ancestors had been Lords of the Manor. Cottle in later life toyed with a signet that sealed his letters with the family crest, *out of a crest-coronet or, a leopard sejant argent*, but there is no sign that even he presumed to display the emphatic shield, *or, a bend gules*.

His father, Robert Cottle, was a merchant clothier from Trowbridge, who had come to the city parish of St. John, Bristol, and there combined a family of eight with ill-luck in business; Mrs Cottle's cousin Anne Steele wrote the hymn 'Father, whate'er of earthly bliss'. The family were respectable and pious, though some of the Cottles in Bristol were more interesting: one Anne Cottle was transported for 14 years as a receiver in 1771; a Grant Cottle in the same year got the death sentence, commuted to transportation, for gagging his aunt and rifling her house; and in 1786 an executed malefactor 'used to keep company with James Cottle, who was called Charley the Flat'. A year after Joseph's birth, the family moved to the corner of St James's Barton, with a business of 'Tailor and Draper'; it must have prospered sufficiently for the children to receive decent educations, and when he was eight Joseph entered Richard Henderson's school at Hanham, where he found leisure to be tossed by a cow and to spend twelve hours unconscious after falling from a sycamore. Also, while the school were bathing in the Avon one sunny afternoon, two boys were drowned during a game of ducking, and the classics master, young John Henderson, going to the rescue, almost sank because his pockets were full of books. The school closed abruptly.

This John Henderson – who was *teaching* Latin and Greek in a Welsh college at the age of twelve – was the first object of Cottle's admiration, and indeed he always retained a proper respect for scholarship and talent. Henderson, although he died young as an opium and astrology addict, put Cottle on to the right course of reading, and sensibly advised him to become a bookseller. Meanwhile, Cottle's elder brother Amos was being privately educated in various parts of England, right up to a degree at Cambridge, and by his association with the Clapham Sect and with Henry Thornton, the anti-slavery agitator, influenced Joseph strongly against slavery. The sisters were at the school kept by Hannah More and *her* sisters, whereafter the Cottle girls opened a fashionable school of their own. For them, Coleridge devised the harsh simile 'doleful as . . . the Miss Cottles'. Their father's house was the resort of interesting people: an African prince from Sierra Leone; Charles Wesley's daughter; the Revd. James Newton, who lectured at the Baptist College and 'whose learning was his least recommendation' (says Cottle, ambiguously); and the half-mad William Gilbert, author of *The Hurricane*, which inspired Wordsworth and the theosophists. From such influences, and from having read before he was twenty-one 'more than a thousand volumes of the best English literature', it is clear that Cottle emerged no unlettered booby awaiting the condescension of talent, but a young man intent on an enlightened career. Apprenticed to a bookseller, he set up on his own on 9 April 1791,

as bookseller, printseller, stationer and binder, on the corner diagonally opposite Christ Church, City, Bristol. He was already writing poetry, of some abundance but of small merit, the best so far being his *Monody* on the death of Henderson, the fourth line of which – ‘Shall I not praise thee? Scholar! Christian! Friend!’ – was admired by Charles Lamb. A couple of these early poems suggest a youthful romance out at Tockington, but they are pretty conventional, the girl is dead, no other love will tear the image of his late sister Eliza from his head . . . and he remained a dedicated bachelor.

When the shop opened, his father had just endured the worst of his several bankruptcies, but Cottle was off to a prosperous start. In addition to novels, religious and political tracts, sermons, anti-slavery literature, and the eleven volumes of *Poets of Great Britain*, he was selling pills and other remedies in the so-called ‘Medical Warehouse’ on the premises: Jackson’s Infallible Ointment for the Itch, Simson’s Infallible Æthereal Tincture for Toothache, Thomas’s Tolu Essence for Consumption, and Young’s Dew Balls for blacking shoes against the wet. But that corner of High St and Corn St was about to become, for a brief couple of years, the most important bookshop in England.

Now that he had both funds and some leisure, his mind was exercised by the subject of slavery; not only black slavery in our colonies, but the tragedy of factory children, as young as six, carted off to work in the factories of the North, and of hapless little London milliners working eighteen hours a day, even on the Sabbath, for the whims of fashion – he calls them ‘half-forgotten instruments/Of ballroom splendour’. He was moved by individual suffering, too; in 1793, the fiftieth anniversary of the death of Richard Savage, he visited the room in our Newgate prison where the poet had died, and wrote an elegy to him in pencil on the wall. Now, too, he started his career as a benefactor, by championing (against Hannah More) poor Anne Yearsley, the milkwoman poetess; by pecuniary assistance he was able to place her ‘once more in a state of comfort’. Before he was twenty-four, his name was on the subscription list for distressed Spitalfields weavers, militiamen’s shoes, an asylum for orphan girls. Everything must have seemed very satisfactory – a leisured competence, a discreet and respected life: but suddenly it was gravelled. While riding in his gig with two Baptist ministers he was thrown out, and his ankle injuries were such that he walked painfully with two sticks for the rest of his life.

But the same year 1794 brought the poets. I have already treated, in the first of these lectures, *Robert Southey and Bristol* (1979), the arrival of Pantisocracy in Bristol, in the persons of Southey, Coleridge, and lesser men, and this has been published



‘Portrait of Joseph Cottle from memory’
by *Charles Lamb*, 1819

(see page 15)

. . . “The lips should be a little thicker & perhaps the left eye has hardly had justice done it but I should only spoil it by tampering with it”. . .

Photograph by Dennis Cutter

by the Bristol Branch of the Historical Association and is still available. But – briefly – the group, fired with vague revolutionary dreams, were recruiting wives in Bristol (mostly, the four Misses Fricker) and intending to emigrate to the Susquehannah River. They came to the bookshop, but Cottle was too lame and too prudent to join this venture, though otherwise he fell under their spell; his generous payments *in advance* for their verses – which often proved to be gifts without return – allowed these young unemployed students to concentrate on writing. He introduced them to influential people like Hannah More, he arranged courses of lectures for them and sold the tickets at his shop, and he reconciled them when they fell out. He also arranged a trip to Tintern for Coleridge, Southey, and their fiancées, but it was a disaster. The evening before, Southey was booked to give a lecture on the Roman Empire, and Coleridge successfully begged to be allowed to deliver it instead, since he had particularly studied the subject; he then forgot the engagement. A crowded roomful of people waited for half an hour before walking out. A squabble on the subject broke out between the two ill-assorted idealists in the Beaufort Arms at Chepstow, the two Fricker girls took sides against each other, Cottle's placating voice was drowned, their programme was upset, and they all got hopelessly lost in the woods by the Wye. Their destination was not only the Abbey in the moonlight, eked out with a torch and orchestrated by disturbed jackdaws, with 'gigantic ivies' and other romantically horrid features, but the iron-foundry nearby. After the Abbey, they supped at their inn; but then only Southey would accompany Cottle (who had a horse) to the sublime flame and gloom of the foundry. This trip may be said to have started the Tintern cult in Wordsworth's circle also, and among romantically-minded people generally.

On 25 May 1795 Cottle began to circulate among his friends a big album in which they must write specimens of their art. Southey, of course, was the first to oblige, then 'Hurricane' Gilbert, then Lovell, Amos Cottle, Coleridge, Beddoes the scientist, and others including Wordsworth; it later became a letter-book in which Cottle stuck letters and poems by his more distinguished friends and even by 17th-century predecessors, right down to 1844. The whole precious volume was exported to Cornell in 1955.

His own *Poems* came out on 8 September 1795, in elegant typography and fine hot-pressed paper, though its only good item – according to Southey – was the Henderson *Monody*, and the edition was modestly anonymous; but it was quickly followed by an expanded second edition, omitting the former preface and acknowledging Cottle's authorship. *Lee Boo*, based on his reading

of a book on the Pelew Islands, is a gauche but touching fiction about a prince from a primitive Eden; and *John the Baptist*, in its 230 lines of decent couplets, lends weight to the argument that Pope did far less harm to our poetasters than did Milton with his blank verse. But the Moral Tale of *Ricardo and Cassandra* is fatuous; the hero, who will eventually succumb to intemperance, gambling, profanity, singing, tobacco and women, has made a good start, though ambiguously 'No interest sway'd the friendship he profest' and 'No little cunning clos'd his full-orb'd eye'. His fall is due to a TUTOR whose qualifications for moral tutorship are glaringly absent, and who takes him to GALLIA, of all places.

The other poems give less warning of Cottle's future. He expands and paraphrases Psalm XVIII into heavy rhyme, and *Sir Malcolm and Alla* is a ballad with a tolerable story of love and war, though the heroine's song could even stop 'The well-tun'd bagpipe'. But *War, A Fragment*, is really a poem of some importance, if only for its novel hint that war is not the best corporate expression of a nation's will. The setting, of a great city under British siege but beaten by famine, could have made the poem violently unpopular in patriotic Bristol; the decent young citizen who ventures out at night to talk to the dying on a gory battlefield finds a British youth clutching a girl's picture, and gives him a sharp political lecture on the cause of his undoing –

'Perchance some stateman's pique, some shrine profan'd,
A flag insulted, or a skiff detain'd;
These blow the blasts of war'.

The youth admits his folly in leaving the plough for a dazzling uniform, and when he dies Cottle turns to more general invective and also to the fate of Poland and the 'most-injur'd Patriot' Kosciusko (who wrote him a letter of thanks). Then the angry words swell to a denunciation of so many famous heroes,

Scourges of earth, and Heralds of dismay,
Pests of mankind, and whirlwinds of their day;
From whose example blushing History rakes
Her nest of Scorpions, and her brood of Snakes.

Let those who admire war and its pageantry think of the putrid plain of corpses, and remember of every victim that some

blazon'd warrior led him to his doom,
To gain, he knew not what, to fight, he knew not whom.

The starving children, the widows, the tinsel glory and the hollow

gain, may all be commonplaces, and the thesis and its illustrations rather obvious and pre-Napoleonic; but, at that date, the frank and imperious lines were daring and visionary. Whereas the Pantisocrats and Wordsworth would forget their early ardour and conform, the humble Cottle never ate his words on this grave theme.

From the middle of 1795 onwards, Coleridge kept promising Cottle verses for which he had long been paid, pleading sickness, instancing poverty, and sometimes lying; as he sat in his digs in College St, planning and prattling, Southey sat in growing indignation at his side, scribbling hard for Cottle – and indeed was the only poet who brought him any profit. His *Joan of Arc*, as published by Cottle on 1 December 1795, was a very handsome book, and sold well. When Coleridge was going to marry, Cottle promised him one and a half guineas for every line *after* the volume was complete; when Wordsworth came to Bristol in the August, he met him and at once offered *him* guineas, which were accepted on a mounting scale, though he judged the three poets in precisely the opposite order to the judgment of posterity. Wordsworth's was the longest friendship of his life, limping on from 1795 to 1850; between bouts of neglect and even meanness, Wordsworth occasionally showed himself appreciative, but the fifty-five years do not show him in a good light, and Cottle must have winced to think how business-like their relationship remained. But did he ever reflect on how far his money had obtained the friendship of his other two heroes? – he paid for the Southey wedding-ring, and furnished the Coleridge love-nest in Clevedon with such things as two glasses for the washstand, a tin dust-pan, a carpet-brush, a Bible, a pair of slippers, ketchup, and a cheese toaster, followed by a decorator and some 'sprightly' wallpaper. He leaves us few such details about Wordsworth, even about when and where he met him, as if he was neither awed by the patent moral excellence of a Southey nor blinded by the conversation of a Coleridge, for Wordsworth's morals were less obtrusive and his genius less approachable.

His next big worry (in 1796) was Coleridge's periodical, *The Watchman* – an anxiety, a drudgery, and really a failure. Coleridge did as little of the routine work as he could, and when Cottle invited him to dinner he grew hysterical and claimed that the invitation was only a 'dun' for some verses. It was a foretaste of the fearful trouble that Coleridge was going to cause all his friends.

Cottle was *not* the first publisher of the three poets, as he always claimed, but they had had only trifles printed before, and he was certainly the first to give them their chance; he *was*, by the way, the first publisher of Charles Lamb. His whole life turned on great but one-sided friendships, and in his crippled state his sisters

cosseted him while he looked out of their parlour window at the enviable world. People thought he had a nice face; his one surviving portrait looks kind but troubled, with a high, broad brow and a rather weak cleft chin. He used the Public Library in King St to borrow books for Wordsworth and Coleridge and sometimes to read himself, and the borrowing book, which survives, is eloquent of their interests; meanwhile his more learned brother Amos had brought out a highly original (and unsellable) volume – the first verse translation in English of Icelandic poetry.

Cottle was a keen Dissenter, and took Coleridge over to Bath in a chaise to preach his first sermon at the Unitarian Chapel. Coleridge insisted on wearing his coloured clothes, not black, and merely repeated a political lecture. After dinner in a tavern, he said he would preach again in the afternoon, and did so – on the Hair Powder Tax; the congregation of 20 left one by one, a ‘Sunday desecrated’. Unknown to Cottle, Coleridge was already taking laudanum.

Several of Cottle’s little holidays were notable, especially one at Whitsun 1796, when he wrote quite his best poem, *Malvern Hills*, 1600 lines and a full canvas of topics. Despite its many plunges, it must be remembered that Wordsworth paid it the mighty honour of quoting five of its lines in the glorious setting of his own *Prelude*, Book VIII, where a group of old countryfolk are depicted:

A cheerful smile unbends the wrinkled brow,
The days departed start again to life,
And all the scenes of childhood reappear,
Faint, but more tranquil, like the changing sun
To him who slept at noon and wakes at eve.

In the summer of 1797 he had a marvellous day at Nether Stowey with William and Dorothy Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Thomas Poole, when he sensed the mysterious happiness and triumph of the little group; everything, he felt, was touched with the same miracle – the brown jug of ale, the bread and cheese, the sunbeams and breeze and butterflies. He is our historian of this famous dawn when it was bliss to be alive, just as he is our biographer of all three poets in their shaping days. After a holiday with Southey at Christchurch in Hampshire, he developed eye-trouble, and Wordsworth wrote him soothing letters, culminating in an invitation to Alfoxton: ‘I’ve gone on very rapidly adding to my stock of poetry. Do come and let me read it to you, under the old trees in the park’. Thus in May 1798 Cottle took his most important holiday, though it began with an absurd dinner of bread and lettuce, since the brandy had fallen on the road, a tramp had stolen the cheese, and the maid had forgotten the salt. But after a

week at Alfoxton and Lynmouth, Cottle returned clutching *The Ancient Mariner* and with plans for the publication of *Lyrical Ballads*, the supreme achievement of his life.

By now, Cottle was getting into financial difficulty; on 7 March 1798, a week before his father retired from tailoring to become Master Corn-Measurer to the City, they gave up the house in the Barton and Cottle took over the premises last occupied by Coleridge's friend Wade at 5 Wine St. His advertisement in *Felix Farley's Journal* for 24 March thanks past patrons for their favours, and calls the new shop 'commodious', and it was certainly bigger; but the corner shop (long rebuilt, and now a photographer's) was on a commanding site neighboured by two churches, the Council House, and the Old Dutch House, whereas the new premises (in a packed street wiped out in the War) were both noisy and unobtrusive, and his bookselling would end in sixteen months. It is customary to point to the corner of High St and Corn St as the birthplace of the *Lyrical Ballads*, but they certainly saw the light in 5 Wine St.

On 12 June 1798, Wordsworth and his sister came back from their own Tintern trip – over the ferry to Aust, then walking to the Downs, and down Park St, Wordsworth still composing *Tintern Abbey* all the while. He penned it in Cottle's parlour, but the shop proved too noisy for them, so they went out to Shirehampton and then left for the Continent within a week. *Lyrical Ballads* was duly issued: Coleridge had been against putting their names on the joint effort – 'Wordsworth's name is nothing to a large number of people; mine stinks', but the 1st edition, in September 1798, bore their two names and was badly received. Cottle almost immediately sold it to Longman, and within ten months of this, his greatest triumph, he was out of business and bankrupt – whereafter he spent 25 years paying his creditors what he had 'legally . . . but not *morally*' discharged. His sisters's school was flourishing, and he did not suffer materially, but all else in his life looks like an anti-climax.

Since the circle was now breaking up, he had to make new friends. One of the first was young Humphry Davy, who came from Penzance and assisted at the Pneumatic Institute in Hotwell. Davy gave Cottle his first chemistry set, and quite converted him to an interest in science. Cottle leaves an uproarious account of the earliest experiments with laughing gas – how Davy gave whiffs of it to his friends and studied their reactions: an Irishman became fighting-mad; a young lady rushed downstairs into Dowry Square, charged across, leapt over a large dog, and had to be pounced on by a couple of gentlemen.

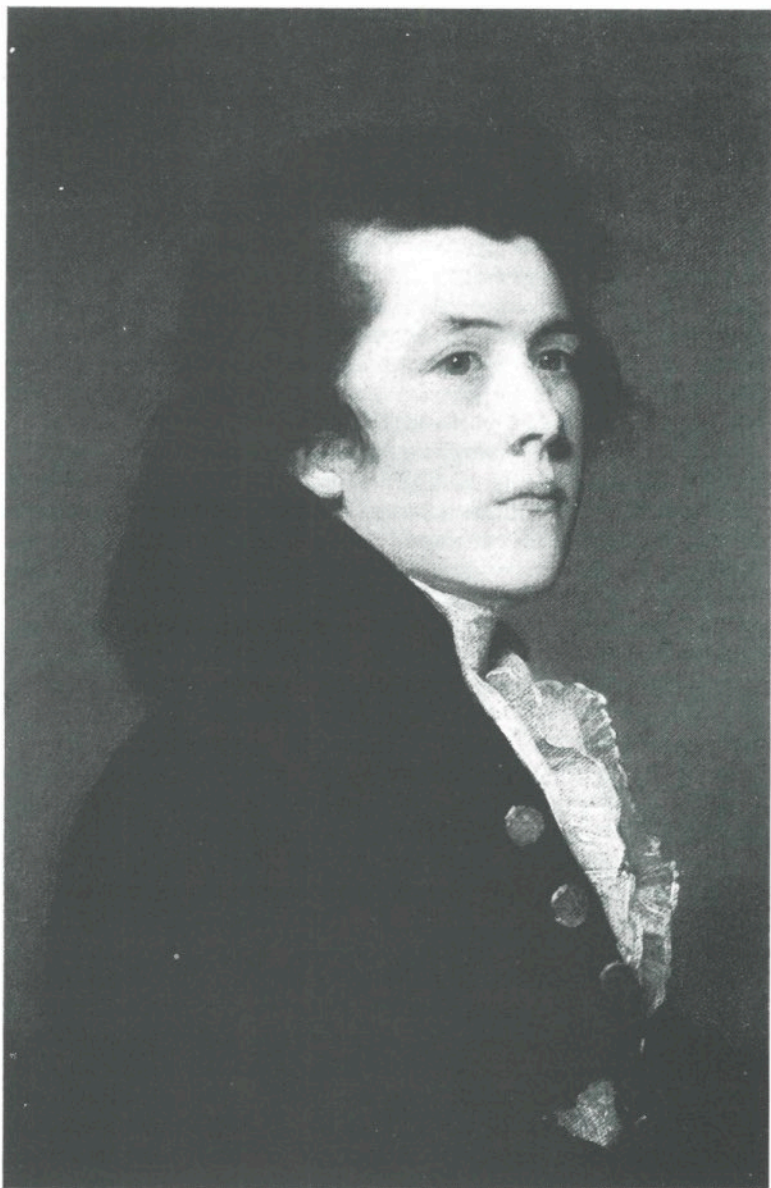
The last reunion of the old Romantic circle took place in October 1799, when Cottle and Coleridge went from Bristol, up

through Tadcaster and York, and joined Wordsworth at Sockburn. They went sightseeing for three days towards the Lake District, the two poets on foot, Cottle 'hugely muffled up' on a mare called Lily; but Wordsworth was taciturn, Coleridge had just fatally met Sara Hutchinson for the first time, and suddenly Cottle had had enough; he left them at Greta Bridge, and turned south for London to clear up his business. Something else had ended for him besides the 18th century.

It might be felt that Cottle's importance now ceases, that only Cottle the publisher has any lasting significance; but there is justification for witnessing the rest of his crowded life, as Professor George Whalley claimed in a generous letter which he sent to me from Canada in 1968. He saw Cottle as 'a very real person, compassionate and sensible, and upright in the face of disability and disaster . . . The accident of his brilliant acquaintance doesn't diminish him; it puts him under a stronger light'. He adds that Wordsworth, Coleridge and Lamb never saw him 'straight. They treated him as a butt. . . . I find Cottle fascinating more for what he was than for what he did'. Certainly, among provincial typographers and publishers his name should stand high; without the splendours of Baskerville at Birmingham, or the daring range of McCreery at Liverpool, he nevertheless braved risks such as the *Lyrical Ballads* and Fox's *Achmed*, and brought out handsome or pretty volumes such as the great *Joan* and the Coleridge-Lamb *Poems* of 1796.

A holiday in 1800 at the prehistoric remains near Westbury, Wilts, added archaeology to his many pursuits, but his father, his youngest sister Martha, and his brother Amos, all died this year, giving Charles Lamb scope for a maliciously funny letter. He says that visiting the house of mourning for Amos, he diverted Joseph's mind by praising Joseph's poetry! Joseph said he had 'always thought that the qualities of his brother's heart exceeded those of his head; I believe his brother, when living, had formed precisely the same idea of *him*; and I apprehend the world will assent to both judgments'.

For, above all, Cottle was determined to be a recognized poet, and used his new leisure largely for the composition of huge epics – *Alfred*, in over 13,500 dreary lines; *Messiah*, in nearly 11,000; *The Fall of Cambria* in 12,000. It is charitable not to quote – especially phrases like 'Cheer thou up!' – but all his friends agreed that his rhymed verse was far better than his desperate *blank* verse; a king hears that twelve men are coming to slay him – 'Twelve, dost thou say? Curse on those dozen villains!'. His prefaces are even worse . . . 'My style, by some persons, has been censured for not being sufficiently elevated' . . . 'Interest can only be attained by moving the breast' . . . The reader will find no 'classical or scientific



Amos Simon Cottle (1766–1800), pastel by William Palmer, 1787, in the
National Portrait Gallery

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embellishments . . . learned references . . . metaphysical illustrations or abstract sentiments'. As for *Messiah* – in view of its aims it will 'appear not unconnected with utility'! After looking at *Alfred*, Coleridge wrote to Southey, 'Poor Joseph! he has scribbled away both head and heart. . . . Had he gone in his quiet way on a little pony, looking about him with a sheep's-eye cast now and then at a short poem, I do verily think, from many parts of the *Malvern Hills*, that he would at last have become a poet better than many who have had much fame, but he *would* be an Epic . . .' Eventually, some of Cottle's friends called him 'the Regicide' because of his treatment of King Alfred. Southey, courteous to his face and gracious in correspondence, but often faithless behind his back, was writing in 1801 that Cottle was 'utterly unfit for any situation – as there happen to be no convents in England. He would make an excellent monk'.

His good works began again, especially a definitive edition, with Southey, of the works of Chatterton, which brought the boy's widowed sister £500 and comfort in her old age, with no gain to the editors. When he told her that he had proved her brother to be the author of all the Rowleiana, she brightened and said with an arch smile, 'Aye, to be sure: any body might have seen that with half an eye!' The Cottle ladies were now attending Broadmead Baptist Church, and Cottle joined them. He republished the mercifully brief *John the Baptist*, and Southey wrote spitefully to a friend:

As for Mr Cottell
He's exceedingly well
And another poem he has writed,
About John the Baptizer
Twill not make you wiser
Nor will you be over-delighted.

It was you may guess
The first fruits of his press –
To me he presented a copy –
Some bards ere they sing
Quaff from Castaly spring,
But Joseph takes syrup of poppy.

Then he put the *Psalms* into metre – or, as Coleridge said in his notebooks, he blew over King David's diamonds 'the oxygenous blast of his own inspiration', and turned them into charcoal.

Another new friend was the essayist and Baptist minister John Foster, who was a pastor out at Downend. His character, as conveyed by his essays and letters, does not attract me – one letter to Cottle is a list of all their acquaintances whose funerals he has

recently attended, ending with the jolly touch 'I remain' – but Cottle depended much on him over years when rheumatism, ingrowing toenail, eye trouble, and lung haemorrhages, made him feel more and more helpless. And it must be remembered that Foster was the first critic (in 1805) to apply the epithet 'Romantic' to the young poetical movement, and that his study of 'the ascendancy of imagination over judgment', of romantic humanitarianism and its fallacies, was a pioneer work.

Cottle's sisters Ann and Mary now moved their school from Gloucester St to larger premises in Brunswick Square, where – though sickly and coddled – he earned his keep by teaching arithmetic, geography and grammar, making pens, keeping the accounts, marking the linen, administering all the medicines and plasters, and attending to what is now called D.I.Y.. His sister Sarah was by now married in Plymouth, and rich; his brother Robert was about to marry 'a most interesting and superior Young Woman, with whom we are all delighted'. Poor Elizabeth Cottle became more interesting and less superior: Robert founded his own religion, the Cottleites, with their own church and pastor at Putney. When he died in 1858, his widow went mad, claimed that he was Messiah, and spent her fortune on tracts about the Cottle Church and the Cottle heavens; this literature she distributed to heads of departments in Whitehall – wouldn't it have been lovely if all the big men in the corridors of power had been Cottleites for ever and ever, instead of all the odd things that they are *now*?

Thomas de Quincey, the opium eater, called in 1807, with the offer of a gift of £500 for Coleridge, which Cottle was to convey anonymously; Cottle persuaded him to reduce it for the time being to £300, and almost certainly gave away de Quincey's identity as well. For Coleridge was back in Bristol, financially embarrassed, and sometimes in pain through leaving off 'some medicines'; accepting Cottle's invitations, and strangely effusive yet strangely evasive. He was gone by the end of the year, and their reunion in 1814 brought only disaster. Southey's friendship, expressed in a glowing letter of 1808, was all the more valuable; he told Cottle that 'there never was a more generous, nor a kinder heart than yours . . . My heart throbs, and my eyes burn with these recollections. Good night my dear old friend and benefactor'. But Cottle wrote to Southey in 1811 of his present exclusion from literary society; he was meeting nobody, and 'The flower of Poesy blooms and withers in my own breast'.

Cottle's mother died in 1813, and the *Bristol Mirror* called her 'mother of the Misses Cottle', as if poor Joseph – at 43 – had ceased to have an identity. His health and mobility declined, and when Coleridge returned – an obvious opium addict – in 1814, Cottle was reduced to his lowest physical state, which he obviously

attributed to anxiety over Coleridge: he was lending and giving him money, desperately trying with friends to set up an annuity for him, and writing huge letters to all their acquaintances, culminating in a mighty rebuke to Coleridge for his depravity, his squandering of his talents, and his neglect of his family. To his face, Coleridge expressed contrition and the desire to pray, though whining that the oil that Cottle had poured into the 'raw and festering wound' of his conscience was 'oil of Vitriol'; behind his back, he made fun of Cottle's earnestness and even of the burst blood vessels in his lung; 'he is a well-meaning Creature, but a great Fool'. And finally, unable to squeeze anything more out of Cottle or Bristol, he left it in anger, though his indignant shade, rustling in the Coleridge family cupboard, would be the villain of Cottle's later years. Yet let us remember that, in the bliss of the dawn, he had sent Cottle a winsome letter containing his deepest confidences, entrusting to it his first impressions of Dorothy Wordsworth, his new friend's 'exquisite sister', her manners 'simple, ardent, impressive, . . . her most innocent soul, . . . her information various, . . . her eye watchful in minutest observation of nature, . . . her taste a perfect electrometer'. But the last of all his letters to Cottle, from Calne on 10 March 1815, was a very different affair: cadging, promising, planning a school and a continuation of *The Friend*, and ending with the lyrical note that, unlike the nightingale, he cannot sing with his breast against a thorn.

Middle age brought Cottle less literature, more religion, less ambition, more content; his health grew unexpectedly good, his outlook sunny and interested, with holidays that produced nice rambling poems like *Dartmoor* in 1819, a healthy and lively document reflecting our recovery from an arduous war and our advances in science and engineering – while it affirms his belief in the Deluge and reconciles it with the local geology; the invalid poet had awakened from a dream of self-pity. But here we must enter for a while the murkiest region of Cottle's fame; for his second most enduring monument is Byron's excoriating attack on him in *English Bards and Scottish Reviewers*, published in 1809. The 26 masterly lines – brutal, lordly, careless, and sparkling – confuse Joseph with the long-dead Amos, and show how a cosmopolitan peer should deal with a little tradesman:

Another Epic! Who inflicts again
 More books of blank upon the sons of men?
 Boeotian Cottle, rich Bristowa's boast,
 Imports old stories from the Cambrian coast,
 And sends his goods to market – all alive!
 Lines forty thousand, Cantos twenty-five!

Fresh fish from Helicon! who'll buy? who'll buy?
 The precious bargain's cheap – in faith, not I.
 Too much in turtle Bristol's sons delight,
 Too much o'er bowls of sack prolong the night.
 If Commerce fills the purse, she clogs the brain,
 And Amos Cottle strikes the lyre in vain.
 In him an author's luckless lot behold!
 Condemned to make the books which once he sold.
 Oh, Amos Cottle! – Phoebus! what a name
 To fill the speaking-trump of future fame!
 Oh, Amos Cottle! for a moment think
 What meagre profits spring from pen and ink!
 When thus devoted to poetic dreams,
 Who will peruse thy prostituted reams?
 Oh! pen perverted! paper misapplied!
 Had Cottle still adorned the counter's side,
 Bent o'er the desk, or, born to useful toils,
 Been taught to make the paper which he soils,
 Ploughed, delved, or plied the oar with lusty limb,
 He had not sung of Wales, nor I of him.

An offhand footnote makes things no better:
 'Mr Cottle, Amos, Joseph, I don't know which, but one or both,
 once sellers of books they did not write, and now writers of books
 they do not sell, have published a pair of epics – *Alfred* . . . and
 the *Fall of Cambria*'.

(Lamb in 1819 meanly and flatteringly wrote to Cottle for the
 loan of 'any small portrait' of him, since a 'great friend' of his is
 illustrating a selection of living bards; Cottle promptly despatched
 Nathan Branwhite's miniature, not knowing that the 'great friend'
 was William Evans, of the *Pamphleteer*, who was seeking to
 grangerize a copy of Byron's poem. Lamb also let Evans have an
 impish 'portrait of Joseph Cottle from memory'; see page 4).

It was ten years before Cottle published his reply, the 229
 heroic-couplet lines of *An Expostulatory Epistle to Lord Byron*, in
 which no punches are pulled. Byron is accused of drinking from his
 father's skull, of being a pander and a satanist, and of perverting
 thousands. Along with this, Cottle later published a prose com-
 mentary, where he twits Byron for finding 'Amos' an amusing
 name – '*Amas* would have been clear enough': a venomous touch,
 coming from the mild Cottle. Had he known, he could have added
 that 'Byron' goes back to an Old English dative plural meaning 'at
 the cowsheds'.

Cottle perhaps little knew how much careless talk there had
 been about him and his brother; he was thus spared some distress
 and fury. Byron, for instance, at Geneva, on 24 June 1816, wrote

one of the truly great English poems.³ I wonder, myself, whether the kind of thing it is trying to do is not, perhaps, more impressive than the final product — whether the spiritual effort did not go into the sheer fact of contemplating and preparing oneself for the full death rather than into the art of the poem about the full death, the full death that (Rosenberg tells us) gives the earthmen ‘new hearing’ as they drink its ‘sound’. What weakens the poem itself is its purple diction. Good and bad are so closely entwined in it, it’s difficult to disentangle them:

I saw in prophetic gleams
These mighty daughters in their dances
Beckon each soul aghast from its crimson corpse
To mix in their glittering dances.
I heard the mighty daughters’ giant sighs
In sleepless passion for the sons of valour,
And envy of the days of flesh
Barring their love with mortal boughs across —
The mortal boughs — the mortal tree of life.

Even there, with the bits of Blake and the crimson corpses, one can see the attempt to articulate an interesting and central idea of Rosenberg’s:

And envy of the days of flesh
Barring their love with mortal boughs across . . .

The mortal tree of life wants protection from the full death — it resists a possible dimension; it wants to protect the dying from the weight of their death as, in a sense, Wilfred Owen did. ‘This book is not about heroes,’ Owen had said of *his* poems. But Rosenberg’s book is very much about heroes, or rather about the possibility of heroism — heroism, note, not patriotism. If the possibility is not poetically achieved in *Daughters of War*, the attempt at any rate was a highly important one. Something closer to achievement occurs in a more modest poem like *Returning we hear the larks*. It brings back once more our theme of music, in describing a return to camp in the thick of war and symbolising

3. F.R. Leavis, ‘The Recognition of Isaac Rosenberg’ (review of *Complete Works*), *Scrutiny* VI, no. 2, 1937, 229–235.

the terrible and vulnerable beauty of experience in a song that is heard while its source is unseen:

Sombre the night is.
And though we have our lives, we know
What sinister threat lurks there.

Dragging these anguished limbs, we only know
This poison-blasted track opens on our camp —
On a little safe sleep.

But hark! — joy — joy — strange joy.
Lo! heights of night ringing with unseen larks.
Music showering our upturned list'ning faces.

Death could drop from the dark
As easily as song —
But song only dropped,
Like a blind man's dreams on the sand
By dangerous tides,
Like a girl's dark hair for she dreams no
 ruin lies there,
Or her kisses where a serpent hides.

The ideal behind Rosenberg's poems comes close to Nietzsche's definition of the Dionysiac spirit in *The Birth of Tragedy* — 'The affirmative answer to life, even in its strangest and hardest problems; the will to life, rejoicing . . . at its own inexhaustible nature.' But to guard against the rhetoric, the stoical fanfares in the face of a meaningless universe that Nietzsche usually sounds off, one can say also that the spirit of Rosenberg's poetry is profoundly Biblical, with its sense of the need to hallow life by spiritual effort and of the need to accept the destiny of suffering ordained by transcendent powers. He was still working at this conception in his unfinished play *The Unicorn*, a play variously about the impingement of the unknown into the lives of ordinary people, into a humdrum marriage, and also about the symbolic unicorn uprooting, destroying, that all may begin anew. I want to draw towards a close, with the description from the first draft of the play, *The Amulet*, of the arrival of the unknown in the shape of a storm and a strange man to Saul, whose marriage is failing and who has ceased to live the full spiritual life. His cart is stuck in the mud and out of the storm

which has scattered the human certainties of his life he hears the unpremeditated music of the unknown. The landscape in which all this occurs, with its rain and mud, clearly recalls the western front.

The slime clung
And licked and clawed and chewed the clogged
dragging wheels
Till they sunk nigh to the axle. Saul sodden and
vexed
Like fury smote the mules' mouths, pulling but sweat
From his drowned hair and theirs, while the thunder
knocked
And all the air yawned water, falling water,
And the light cart was water, like a wrecked raft,
And all seemed like a forest under the ocean.
Sudden the lightning flashed upon a figure
Moving as a man moves in the slipping mud
But singing not as a man sings, through the storm,
Which could not drown his sounds.

The Unicorn was never finished. It is merely a series of drafts. Writing from the trenches in 1916, Rosenberg speaks of the skin that must grow 'round and through a poet's ideas if they are to be presented whole' and he adds: 'If you are not free, you can only, when the ideas come hot, seize them with the skin in tatters, raw, crude, in some parts beautiful, in others monstrous.' This very much describes the effect of many of his poems, a fact which makes him so difficult a writer to assess. One critic, David Daiches, goes so far as to suggest that Rosenberg's survival might have changed the entire course of modern English poetry, that he might have inaugurated a new romanticism distinct from the metaphysical strain of T.S. Eliot.⁴ But such claims, of course, one can only leave in the area of speculation, tempting as they are.

Rosenberg — and there is some pleasure in being able to say this in a church — was in a very fundamental sense a religious poet. He feels that the demands made upon him are transcendent ones. Indeed we should be grateful to Isaac Rosenberg that, in an increasingly humanist world, he awakes us to the awareness of

4. David Daiches, review of *Collected Poems*, *Commentary* X, no. 1, July 1950, 91–93.

the barrenness of that world if it no longer lies open to what exceeds the merely human and the merely civic vision of life. And we should be not only grateful but proud that we can say of him, 'Isaac Rosenberg of Bristol.'

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Produced by Alan Sutton Publishing Limited.

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HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION
THE UNIVERSITY, BRISTOL

Price £1.00 1987

ISBN 0 901388 48 3